



Ambassador Jeffrey L. Bleich – Dedication of New Public Affairs Building

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**Ambassador Bleich's Remarks for  
Dedication of New Public Affairs Building  
U.S. Embassy, Canberra**

*(As prepared – April 5, 2013)*

Thanks to everyone for coming.

This is a thrilling day for us. We are bringing our Public Affairs team back home to the embassy after more than forty years at the National Press Club building.

Public affairs has been very patient. This has been quite a construction process. I'd compare it to child-birth. Except that human childbirth takes only nine months. This is more like elephant birth; which takes two years, and has no epidurals. And it could have been worse. For a while there it looked like we might even have to compare its construction to gestating a frilled shark – which takes about three and a half years, and sounds particularly painful.

So, the gestation was long, labor was painful, but –as happens when there is a birth – in the end, according to my wife, you forget the pain and just appreciate the magnificent results. And so today I'm filled with gratitude for this beautiful building.

This took a while in part because it is such an ambitious project.

First, it had to be a state-of-the-art facility for public diplomacy – one that can expand and adapt to the information age both on-line and people to people, and operate at network speed.

Second, it had to be a clean and green building in keeping with our commitment to meet LEED standards.

Third, it had to be faithful to the historic architecture of this Embassy, including harvesting mud to make the bricks from the same place that was used to construct the Chancery.

Fourth, it could not obstruct any views or disturb the balance and scale of the land.

And Fifth, it had to have a green roof garden with just the right dimensions to contain a proper putting green and tee box. The fact that I can practice my putting and drives up



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there is worth all the pain. (I'm pretty sure I can't hit the Swedish or Indian Embassies yet, but practice makes perfect).

Seriously, we succeeded on each and every one of these measures.

Now, a project of this complexity – a green LEED-certified state of the art historic brick unobtrusive building -- requires a lot of work from a lot of people.

We would not be here today without the work of Contracting, Consulting, Engineering (CCE) out of Annapolis, Maryland, and local contractor Kane Construction. I wish I could thank every one of the people who worked on the project by name, but that would literally take all day. So in their stead, I want to specially acknowledge Jason Vienna, from CCE. And from Kane, a big thanks to site manager Guy Beaumont, Neil Durston, and Claire Andonopoulos.

And I have a special thanks to long-suffering – as well as the longest serving – member of the team, apprentice Nathan Lowe, who has been here since day one. Nathan was the hardest working person on the building. I can attest to this personally, because Nathan likes to get the noisiest parts of the job out of the way early. . . . Say 6 a.m. . . . On Saturday mornings. . . . Right below our bedroom window. . . . So, really, I can say with all sincerity, Nathan, no one will feel your absence this weekend more than Becky and I will.

From the State Department's Overseas Building Operations, thanks to our local project director, Kenny Shiranian, and his predecessors, Tom Farley and Susan Glasner.

Thanks as well to Counselor for Public Affairs Paul Houge – who has timed his arrival in the Lucky Country perfectly to move into this beautiful new space – as well as his less fortunate predecessors, Judy Moon and Scott Weinhold, for their leadership.

This building has been wired for the 21st century and “future-proofed” for the digital age. This would not have been possible without our former embassy webmaster, Adam Wilson, digital whiz-kid Travis Longmore, and the crack team from IRM led by Kevin Waggoner and his predecessor Marcia Henke, and consisting of Mark Chalkley, Erik Connaway, and Phil Wilkin.

Thanks to Kathy Johnson, Bernt Johnson (no relation – as far as we know), Mark Moore, and the rest of the facilities management and management teams.

Even though he's no longer in Australia, Kevin Goode deserves a special mention for handling site security.



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And, of course, thanks to the indispensable Jason Hyland, Deputy Chief of Mission. Apart from Becky, Jason in particular put up with my ranting more than anyone, whenever work was not going exactly to plan.

Finally, two local staff members were with this project from the beginning. This building – from its initial conception and planning to the finished product – is in large part due to their single-minded dedication to the project. So huge thanks to PAS project coordinator, Trevlyn Gilmour, and to a man who truly deserves a cape, because he is the real hero of the hour, Brendan McCormick. Brendan, just don't leap this building in a single bound, because we need your superhero power for some other things.

Let's give the entire team a well-deserved round of applause.

The building we are dedicating today is more than just bricks and mortar. It is a symbol of our commitment to the U.S.-Australian relationship. It is a symbol of our commitment to the changing world of diplomatic communication. This building, like our Constitution, is solid and traditional, but can be updated to keep pace with a changing world. It is representative of our core American values – free speech, free expression, and open exchanges in the marketplace of ideas.

With the rise of the internet and social media, the nature of diplomatic communication has changed. There was a time when diplomats were neither seen nor heard by the vast majority of the public. Most of our exchanges were government-to-government or military-to-military. When diplomats did appear in public, it was generally a pretty formal occasion, or a quick press statement, followed by a disappearing act. And that was ok. Then. However, as the world has changed, the ways in which we, as diplomats, communicate with the public must change as well. In the internet age, relying only on one-way communication is no longer effective. In a world deluged with information, a press release will often get lost among a thousand blogs. A careful set of bland talking points read without any follow-up questions, will be discounted at best, and disbelieved at worst. And any real delays in responding to events will virtually ensure that others define the response first. And all this means that less considered or informed versions of events will take hold and distort public debate. To apply old tools in a new world muffles the voice of diplomats, and weakens diplomacy.

That's why this building represents a new era. We must meet the challenges of this century with the tools of this century. Today we must engage with members of the public in ways that they engage themselves – on twitter, facebook, flickr, pinterest, radio, cable t.v., and digital media, as well as over coffee, in a garden, or around a conference table. This space offers all of that.



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But it is not merely enough to get your message out there. The difference between talking and persuading is trust. Every time we talk to someone, we ask ourselves a set of trust questions: is this someone who I can relate to, who will respond honestly, who has solid information and judgment and who won't waste my time? Is this someone who I want to talk to again? Building public trust used to be very hard for Embassies to do, because most people will never actually meet a diplomat in person, and you can only learn so much from a speech or a television appearance. But with the Internet, we can solve that problem. Everyone can communicate with our diplomats through our website, our Facebook page, our Twitter account. Someone in the Pilbara can tell us what they think and begin a dialog with us without having to be anywhere near Canberra (which is something people in the Pilbara cherish). So, if you don't already, let me encourage you to "like" us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter (USAEmbassyinOz).

This building also helps us create trust by letting us to communicate in real-time. We trust immediate communication more than careful words. A real-time response assures people that we are seeing the same things they are looking at, that we are committed to getting them the information they need quickly, and that we aren't stonewalling or managing and massaging and spinning.

This is not just good diplomacy. It is our duty. The public is affected by the policies that our governments put into place, and so members of the public have a right to expect that we will respond. Our Mission is the only one in the world that I know of that allows its diplomats to go on ABC's "Q and A." It's because we believe the public is entitled to comment on and to ask questions about issues. Sometimes the answers are classified, sometimes we honestly don't know the answer yet, but even sharing that much about what we know and what we don't know, what we can say and can't say, builds trust. People may not always like the answer – in fact, my daughter collects screen-shot all of the nasty tweets I've received here – but hopefully they can never say this. They can never say the U.S. Mission has failed to be honest, or hold its positions up to scrutiny.

Finally, the building provides one more important symbol. The buildings we build, the way we express ourselves, reveals our own values. This building demonstrates our commitment to the historic foundations of this relationship. It demonstrates our commitment to free expression and an open internet. And it demonstrates our commitment to this community – to a greener environment for our neighbors. If you haven't already been up there yet, we have a green roof on the building. We use far less energy to heat and cool the building. And the more than 3,500 plants on the roof and around the building – most of which are native to Australia – are hardy and drought tolerant. The decoration inside the building will be symbolic of our commitment to reach out and learn from our neighbors here. We are currently running a photo contest through our social media sites "The United States through Australian Eyes." The winning photos



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will hang in the offices behind me. Let me just say that I'll be one of the judges, so any pictures involving Elvis are sure to get at least one vote. Our winners will also be treated to a little old-fashioned person-to-person diplomacy when they join us for our Fourth of July celebrations.

So before we cut the ribbon, let me finish with this final thought. About a year ago, when we had some challenges with the building, we all got together to sort through differences and hopefully remember the bigger picture. It reminded me of the story of two brick-layers. A man comes along and asks the first brick layer, "what are you doing?" The brick-layer looks up, and says, "what does it look like I'm doing? I'm laying bricks." The man then walks over and asks the second brick-layer the same question "what are you doing?", and that brick-layer says: "I'm building a cathedral."

That was the spirit in which this building was completed. It is more than bricks. It is a special place for, and a monument to, a new age of diplomacy.

Paul, Brendan, Kenny, TJ, and Guy, please join me up here.

It is now my very great pleasure to officially declare this building open!